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## Otar Lordkipanidze zum siebzigsten Geburtstag

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## The Caspian Gates in Roman-Persian relations in ancient Transcaucasia

By David Braund, Exeter

The "Caspian Gates" prove as problematic as they are familiar in the ancient history of the Caucasus. The toponym is associated with at least three distinct places by our sources<sup>1</sup>:

1) the passage to the south of the Caspian Sea; 2) the pass at Derbend; 3) the route that runs north out of Iberia from Mtskheta up the valley of the Aragvi and down the Terek towards modern Vladikavkaz, the so-called Darial Pass. The tripartite division is useful, but it misses much of the main point about the term "Caspian Gates", namely that the ancient sources are usually uncertain, schematic and/or confused in their knowledge of the geography of the region.

Only one classical author makes very clear distinctions between the three routes, namely Ptolemy c. AD 150. For him the Caspian Gates are the pass to the south of the Caspian Sea, while the pass at Derbend is termed the "Albanian Gates"; the pass north from Iberia is termed the "Sarmatian Gates"<sup>2</sup>. Also exceptional is the toponym "Caucasian Gates", which is found in the account of the elder Pliny, who published his *Natural History* in AD 77.

Pliny mentions the pass twice in his sixth book:

1) "By them are the Caucasian Gates, called by many, in great error, "Caspian", a huge work of nature where the mountains are suddenly broken apart. There doors have been added, with iron-bound beams, beneath the centre of which flows a river of dreadful smell and, on the near side, on a rock a fort called Cumania has been built to ward off the passage of innumerable tribes. In that place the world is divided by gates, opposite, especially, Hermastus a town of the Iberians. From the Caucasian Gates through the Gurdinian mountains are the Valli and Suani, undefeated tribes; however they dig gold-mines. From these as far as Pontus are very many types of Heniochi, then Achaei. Such is the plan of one of the most famous portions of the world."<sup>3</sup>

2) "At this point the error of many persons must be corrected, the error made by even those who recently campaigned with Corbulo in Armenia. For these men gave the name "Caspian" to the gates of Iberia which we said are called "Caucasian". And the plans drawn up and sent from there have this name inscribed upon them. And the threat of the emperor Nero was said to be to march to the "Caspian" gates, when he aimed at those gates which stretch through Iberia to the Sarmatians, which take one hardly any closer to the Caspian Sea. However, there are other gates beside the Caspian tribes, which cannot be distinguished except through those who took part in the campaign of Alexander the Great."<sup>4</sup>

Why is Pliny so confident in rejecting the term Caspian Gates for the Darial Pass, even against the recent usage of Corbulo's campaign? I suggest that a solution is suggested by the famous inscription of AD 75 found near Mtskheta<sup>5</sup>, which shows that the emperor

<sup>1</sup> Anderson 1928; Kettenhofen 1996. This paper has benefited greatly from discussion at the conference, especially with Profs. Gagoshidze, Jorbenadze and Stronach.

<sup>2</sup> Ptol. 5.8.5.

<sup>3</sup> Plin., nat. 6.30.

<sup>4</sup> Plin., nat. 6.40.

<sup>5</sup> On its discovery see Apakidze 1968, 130-134, concluding that it was found at Nakulbakevi, not Bagineti. Cf. Braund 1994, 227-230.



Vespasian (AD 69–79) had played a key role in the fortification of Iberia ("strengthened walls"). Of course, much of the detail remains obscure. We do not know which walls had been strengthened. Parallels suggest that Rome had sent military engineers and perhaps money. Vespasian's involvement implies serious thought at Rome about the defences of Iberia. That was new since Corbulo and probably the source of Pliny's confidence.

The issue had already involved relations with the Parthian empire, for the Parthian king asked for Roman help against the Alans during the reign of Vespasian<sup>6</sup>. The Romans refused, though not without discussion: Vespasian's son Domitian wished to intervene. This was early in Vespasian's reign, when about AD 72 peoples of the North Caucasian Foreland had crossed the Caucasus and inflicted great damage in Media and Armenia. Although Josephus is evidently confused on various points of detail, there is no reason in principle to question the event and its date<sup>7</sup>.

This is the first evidence of a Parthian request to Rome for cooperation in Transcaucasia against invasions from the north, later a theme of Roman-Persian relations. The request probably arose from the diplomatic agreement that Nero had reached with the Parthians over Armenia, culminating in the grand reception by Nero in Rome of Tiridates of Armenia, the brother of the Parthian king. Nero maintained good relations with the Parthian king until his death: he sent flowers for Nero's grave<sup>8</sup>. It is in the context of this warm relationship between Nero and the Parthians, that Nero's projected campaign to the Caspian Gates is to be interpreted. Evidently, the Parthians were not offended by the project: I would suggest that the campaign was regarded by the Parthians as a form of cooperation against the peoples of the north. When the Parthians asked for such cooperation under Vespasian, they were asking for the completion of a project already planned under Nero<sup>9</sup>.

Given the importance of the Caucasus in the early 70s, Pliny evidently had access to ample new information about Caucasian routes to incorporate in his work of AD 77, completed two years after the Iberian inscription was cut. Elsewhere Pliny used centurions' reports<sup>10</sup>, when emperors sent them to unknown regions. Under Vespasian's son Domitian, a Roman centurion left a graffito near Baku<sup>11</sup>. If Roman military engineers were in Iberia in the early 70s AD, Pliny doubtless benefited from their explorations there.

However, the impact of Pliny's account was limited. Even Tacitus did not follow Pliny's distinction, though he used Pliny's writings and was a family friend. He describes a Sarmatian incursion of AD 35: the king of the Iberians was Pharasmanes, who:

"... allied himself to the Albani and summoned the Sarmatians, whose chieftains (septuchi) took different sides after accepting gifts from both, in the manner of their people. But the Iberians, controlling the places, by the Caspian way (Caspia via) suddenly poured Sarmatians into Armenia. By contrast those Sarmatians who came to help the Parthians were easily kept back, since their enemies (sc. the Iberians) had closed off other routes of access, while one remaining route between the sea and the ultimate mountains of the Albani had been made difficult by the tide, for the shallows were filled by the blasts of the etesian winds. In winter the south wind rolls back the waves and when the sea is driven back upon itself the shallows of the shoreline are laid bare."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Suet., Dom. 2; Dio 66.15.3.

<sup>7</sup> Jos., bell. Iud. 7.244 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Suet., Nero 57; cf. Tac., Hist. 1.2.

<sup>9</sup> Tac., Hist. 1.8 suggests that some troops had even been sent to Transcaucasia in advance of Nero's campaign there; cf. Kolendo 1982; Braund 1994, 225–226.

<sup>10</sup> Plin., e.g. nat. 6.184.

<sup>11</sup> Heidenreich 1983; Braund 1991 a.

<sup>12</sup> Tac., Ann. 6.33.

The "Caspian way" is evidently the route north from Iberia: Pliny's term "Caucasian Gates" is ignored. The rulers of Iberia also preferred to retain the name of the "Caspian Gates". For at about the time that Tacitus published his *Annals* in about AD 116, an Iberian prince died while besieging Nisibis with the emperor Trajan. His epitaph, in grandiose Greek, says of the Iberian prince that his "native land lies by the Caspian Gates"<sup>13</sup>. Evidently, the rulers of Iberia were no more interested than was Tacitus in the fine distinctions and terminology used by Pliny and Ptolemy.

The Caspian Gates were famous throughout the Greco-Roman world, particularly through their association with Alexander the Great, who had passed south of the Caspian Sea. It is easy to understand why writers like Tacitus and Statius might prefer to retain the term<sup>14</sup>. It is also easy to see why the rulers of Iberia might approve an association with such a famous location, for the association gave Iberia and its rulers a stronger image and a link with Alexander. Appropriately, Nero called the legion raised for his expedition to the Caspian Gates "Athe phalanx of Alexander the Great"<sup>15</sup>.

The passage north from Iberia repays closer attention. First, it is to be noted that the relationship between the Iberians and the tribes to the north was not simple hostility. Tacitus mentions the Iberians as forming a cooperative alliance with the Sarmatians in AD 35. We find the same process later in AD 135<sup>16</sup>. Strabo claims that the Iberians of the mountains were the kinsmen of the tribes of the plain to the north and fought beside them<sup>17</sup>. In Iberia the Caspian Gates were not so much a barrier as a means of control, perhaps even taxation. It remains very doubtful whether there really was an actual pair of gates, though Pliny does say as much, as we have seen. A fortification seems to me to be more likely. Nor could control be guaranteed: the Kartlis Tskhovreba shows that the passage could not always be held against a determined onslaught.

Secondly, there were many routes across the Main Caucasus, often neglected by modern scholars, as also by some of our ancient sources. The importance of the Darial Pass is that it is one of the easiest. Some ancient texts show an awareness of these other routes, as did Tacitus<sup>18</sup>. Procopius, whose geography of Transcaucasia can be poor, gets this point right<sup>19</sup>. After all, what is a pass? A determined and unencumbered traveller can find many routes through the mountains north of Iberia. Particularly so in good weather at the right time of year. There was a distinctly seasonal element in the practicability of these routes, then as now. Tacitus notes as much even at Derbend. The tribes of the north were far more likely to invade southwards across the mountains in the spring and summer. By the onset of autumn, crossing was already becoming more difficult. Much would depend also upon the attitude of the local inhabitants of these mountain regions: crossing without their permission would be all the more difficult. Yet, as we have seen, according to Strabo, relations between these mountain-dwellers and the Sarmatians of the northern plain were notably good. As Gachechiladze recently observed in a different context, the Caucasus is "not an insurmountable barrier"<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> IGR 1.192.

<sup>14</sup> Silv. 4.4.63–4, AD 95.

<sup>15</sup> Suet., Nero 19.

<sup>16</sup> Dio 69.15; cf. Braund 1991 b.

<sup>17</sup> Strabo 11.3.3, p. 500 with Boltunova 1947; Lordkipanidze 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Tac., Ann. 6.33.

<sup>19</sup> Proc., de bell. 1.10.3–8.

<sup>20</sup> Gachechiladze 1995, 9; cf. Freshfield 1909; Левин 1938.



One pass which deserves more attention is the Mamison Pass that leads towards the headwaters of the Rioni and from there into Western Georgia<sup>21</sup>. In my view, much of the argument that raged between the Byzantines and Persians over the control of Suania (roughly, ancient Svaneti) in the sixth century AD arose from concern for the control of this route, which was relatively easy and led from the north of Iberia into Colchis<sup>22</sup>. It is only when we appreciate the existence of such "other routes" across the Main Caucasus as are mentioned by Tacitus and Procopius that we can understand ancient narratives which are less explicit<sup>23</sup>.

The Persians had a garrison at the Caspian Gates at Iouroeipaakh<sup>24</sup>. Evidently that strongpoint was situated on the Darial pass, for it leads into Iberia, but it could be circumvented by more difficult routes. The particular issue of the fort has its origins in the middle of the fourth century, discussed but not included in the treaty of AD 363. The Persians had the greater need, but Anastasius came to an agreement<sup>25</sup>. Procopius sheds light:

"Over the years many persons held this fort, down to Ambazoukes. He was a Hun by blood, but a friend of the Romans and of Anastasius their emperor. This Ambazoukes, when he reached a great age and was close to death, sent to Anastasius and asked for money on the understanding that he would give the stronghold and the Caspian Gates to the Romans. But the emperor Anastasius (for he did not know how to act without close examination and was not accustomed so to do) reasoned that it would be impossible for him to supply soldiers there, in a place which was devoid of all good things and which had no neighbouring people that was controlled by the Romans. So he expressed his deep gratitude to the man for his good-will, but did not enter into such an arrangement. Therefore, when Ambazoukes soon afterwards died from a disease, Cavad used force against his sons and held the Gates."<sup>26</sup>

Lydus' evidence shows that Anastasius preferred to give money to Cavad and not intervene directly. That was good sense, for Iberia was in the Persian sphere: the fort would be hard to supply. The presence of the Hun may indicate that Persia manned the garrison with mercenaries, while Rome had preferred to leave it to the Iberians. It seems reasonable to suppose also that this fort had been Pliny's Cumania, located (like the other sites termed "Caspian Gates") in a fairly level passage. In Iberia a distinction must be drawn between the site of the fort and the high crossing to its south near modern Kazbegi. The fort itself is now known by the name of its mediaeval incarnation, "Tamara's Fort"<sup>27</sup>.

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- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Menander Protector, 10.5, Blockley, on the pass of Dareine.
- <sup>22</sup> Chapiroian 1989; Braund 1992.
- <sup>23</sup> For example, Priscus, fig. 47, Blockley.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. Priscus, fig. 41.1, Blockley.
- <sup>25</sup> *Lyd.*, mag. 3.52–53.
- <sup>26</sup> *Proc.*, de bell. 1.10.9–12.
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